



BASKETBALL

FINAL FOUR: Western women face North Georgia Wednesday night

Vikings make program's third Final Four appearance.

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RESUMPTION OF 72-HOUR PARKING RULE HITS HOME TO HOMELESS

No easy fixes to city's car theft problem

By RALPH SCHWARTZ
Staff Reporter



Ed Hunt stands outside his RV on Cornwall Avenue on March 16. Hunt has lived along the road for more than a year. (Hailey Hoffman/Cascadia Daily News)

By KAI UYEHARA
Staff Reporter

Ed Hunt's inoperable recreational vehicle is parked alongside Cornwall Avenue

near the Bellingham Shipping Terminal. A few of his belongings sit outside the rig, such as his cooking grill and a collection of his friend's possessions beside

the door. Hunt, who is living in the RV after losing his farm, said he has parked in the same spot for about two months because his de fac-

to home doesn't run. As he spoke with Cascadia Daily News outside his banged-up rig, Hunt unboxed a part needed to fix the vehicle. Hunt's vehicle is one of

several parked on Cornwall, and one of many parked around Bellingham serving as living quarters.

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The security camera footage isn't especially dramatic, except maybe for the owner of the white Ford F-350 pickup visible on the left side of the frame.

The camera recorded what was described on the social media site NextDoor as a crime in progress: Just after 9 a.m. on Jan. 20 in downtown Bellingham, someone wearing a hoodie and a backpack approaches the driver's door. Less than 30 seconds later, they are in the truck. Less than 20 seconds after that, a plume of white smoke bursts out of the tailpipe. Seconds later, the truck is gone.

January 2022 is a recent high-water mark for stolen cars in Bellingham. Police report 74 auto thefts that month on a crime statistics webpage, the most in any month in at least the past four years. In 2019, Bellingham averaged 13 car thefts per month. So far this year, Bellingham police have recorded on average 68 vehicle thefts per month.

Stolen vehicles have been a growing problem over the past year across Whatcom and Skagit counties, too. Most of the U.S. has seen a spike in vehicle thefts since the pandemic started.

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Community weighs in on Bellingham police chief semifinalists

By RALPH SCHWARTZ
Staff Reporter

Candidates for Bellingham police chief aren't just trying to impress their potential future boss, Mayor Seth Fleetwood. City Hall gave the entire community an opportunity to pass judgment on the three semifinalists during an online forum March 17.

Survey respondents scrutinized the candidates closely, assessing what they wore, whether they made eye contact over Zoom, and most importantly, whether they have what it takes to be the city's police chief in a particularly challenging time for law enforcement.

Former Bellingham Chief David Doll retired less than a year after police killings of unarmed Black people

sparked nationwide protests calling for major police reforms. On top of that, over the past year, Bellingham's property crime rate has risen dramatically.

Community members have been clear about what they want from the next police chief: accountability, trustworthiness, a strong sense of racial equity and the know-how to address rising crime.

People who watched the March 17 forum won't have the final say on who Bellingham's next police chief will be, but 59 survey responses indicated that one candidate rose to the top in their view: Everett Deputy Chief John DeRousse. More than two-thirds of the respondents said he was "strong" in the areas of public safety, trust-building, racial equity

and accountability.

The other two candidates, Lt. Rebecca Mertzig of the Snohomish County Sheriff's Office and Commander Dennis Flynn of Commerce City, Colorado were generally perceived as "adequate" in these areas.

"I thought Mr. DeRousse was the most impressive of the three candidates," one favorable public review of the Everett officer said. "He is able to acknowledge the reality of racism, underlying causes of homelessness and appears to have the capacity to find creative solutions."

DeRousse scored points for preparation. "He also did his homework to learn about local service providers," one respondent said, as DeRousse demonstrated by mentioning Belling-

ham and Whatcom County's GRACE program, or Ground-level Response And Coordinated Engagement, and expressing his desire to partner with Northwest Youth Services.

Some who responded to the survey appreciated Flynn's big-city experience with the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department before moving to Colorado. Flynn said he was initially nervous when the Las Vegas department established a citizen review board in the 1990s, but now says he sees the value of public oversight of police agencies. Flynn said he would look into establishing a similar review board in Bellingham and invite Black Lives Matter and other groups to participate.

"I believe Dennis would

be tough on crime while holding officers accountable," one comment said. Several survey responses expressed concern about Flynn's stated intention to retire in eight years.

Mertzig, who lives in Whatcom County, had the inside track for some respondents as the only female candidate. Some considered her 18 years of law enforcement experience, compared to DeRousse's 27 or Flynn's 33 years, to be a drawback — but not everyone.

"Local candidate, young and female," a survey respondent said. "No-brainer."

In her discussion of racial bias, Mertzig said she has experienced "microaggressions" as a woman in law enforcement.

"I'm a female in a very male-dominated progression," Metzger said. "That's why these issues are very important to me."

Her statement resonated with some survey respondents.

"Mertzig's ... mention of examining her own perspective felt more sincere and more likely for PD improvement," a commenter said. "She is familiar w/ Bham and can build on that. Hire local."

In an email on Monday, Fleetwood's office said the mayor expects to hold additional interviews with police chief finalists in early April. After extensive background checks on the finalists, Fleetwood anticipates making an offer to the city's preferred candidate in May.

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